

Introduction

This study guide has been written for students taking GCE Advanced level English literature. It is suitable for undergraduates and the general reader who is interested in the study of poetry. This guide was originally written to cover a selection of poems prescribed as a set text for exam, but can be used as a way in to the study of metaphysical poetry generally. The poems considered explicitly here are these:

- by John Donne, [The Good-Morrow](#), [The Sunne Rising](#), [The Anniversarie](#), [The Canonization](#), [A Valediction Forbidding Mourning](#) and [A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day](#)
- by George Herbert, [Jordan \(I\)](#), [The Pearl](#), [The Collar](#), [Discipline](#) and [Love \(III\)](#)
- by Andrew Marvell, [The Coronet](#), [Bermudas](#), [To His Coy Mistress](#), [The Definition of Love](#) and [The Garden](#)
- by Henry Vaughan, [The Retreate](#), [The World](#), [Man](#) and ["They Are All Gone into the World of Light"](#)

On an Advanced level course you should study your chosen text (here a range of poems) in very close detail. In preparing for an exam you need to learn to see the whole wood, rather than look at individual trees. Detailed "notes" on poems or line-by-line "cribs" will not be given here. If you want such commentaries they can be found in, for example, [John Donne](#) and [Eight Metaphysical Poets](#) (both published by Heinemann) and in [A Reader's Guide to the Metaphysical Poets](#) by George Williamson (Thames and Hudson).

If you want a close reading of the work of one of these poets, then try my guide to the [George Herbert](#). Click on the link below to open this.

- [Go to guide on George Herbert's poetry](#)

[Back to top](#)

What is a metaphysical poem?

The term "metaphysical" when applied to poetry has a long and interesting history. You should know this, but the information in Helen Gardner's Introduction to [The Metaphysical Poets](#) (Penguin) is more than adequate. Luckily, you have no time in an exam for a lengthy discussion. The examiner wants to see you discuss the text.

Metaphysical poetry is concerned with the whole experience of man, but the intelligence, learning and seriousness of the poets means that the poetry is about the profound areas of experience especially - about love, romantic and sensual; about man's relationship with God - the eternal perspective, and, to a less extent, about pleasure, learning and art.

Metaphysical poems are [lyric](#) poems. They are brief but intense meditations, characterized by striking use of wit, irony and wordplay. Beneath the formal structure (of rhyme, metre and stanza) is the underlying (and often hardly less formal) structure of the poem's argument. Note that there may be two (or more) kinds of argument in a poem. In [To His Coy Mistress](#) the [explicit](#) argument (Marvell's request that the coy lady yield to his passion) is a stalking horse for the more serious argument about the transitoriness of pleasure. The outward levity conceals (barely) a deep seriousness of intent. You would be able to show how this theme of [carpe diem](#) ("seize the day") is made clear in the third section of the poem.

Reflections on love or God should not be too hard for you. Writing about a poet's technique is more challenging but will please any examiner. Giving some time to each (where the task invites this), while ending on technique would be ideal.

Here are some suggestions as to how to look at the detail of individual poems under a very broad heading.

[Back to top](#)

Love in the poems

In Marvell we find the pretence of passion (in [To His Coy Mistress](#)) used as a peg on which to hang serious reflections on the brevity of happiness. [The Definition of Love](#) is an ironic game - more a love of definition let loose; the poem is cool, lucid and dispassionate, if gently self-mocking. So you can move on to Donne, in whom passionate sexual love is examined with vigour and intensity. There are far too many suitable poems to consider all in detail, but [The Good-Morrow](#), [The Sunne Rising](#) and [The Anniversarie](#) belong together, while [A Nocturnall, upon S. Lucie's Day](#) gives the other side of the coin. There is positive celebration of life in [The Good Morrow](#) and the others, while in the [Nocturnall](#) we have the examination of complex negativity.

In [A Valediction, Forbidding Mourning](#) the argument is not logically persuasive, but the cleverness and subtlety of Donne's method are diverting - an intelligent woman might be comforted. She cannot change the fact of the lover's going, but the poem is evidence of the integrity of the love he has professed hitherto.

Both Herbert and Vaughan address man's love of God, while Herbert, and Marvell ([Bermudas](#)), consider God's love of man. Herbert considers man's duty to God in [The Collar](#) and [The Pearl](#) as does Marvell in [The Coronet](#).

Eternity and man's life in the context of this, is the explicit subject of all of Vaughan's poems in the selection, but is considered by Herbert in [The Flower](#) and, in a wholly secular manner, by Marvell in [To His Coy Mistress](#).

In terms of the whole poetry of these four, this small selection accurately reflects the arguably narrow preoccupation of Herbert and Vaughan with religious questions, and the great variety of Marvell.

The selection only of love poems is partly misleading in Donne's case. He wrote a great deal of devotional verse, much of it very good, but his most striking achievements are in the Songs and Sonets. Herbert, of course, is not narrow - he is concerned with man's whole life in relation to God. Vaughan is more problematic - his preoccupation with his own salvation and his conviction that most of mankind is damned are less attractive qualities. He is fanatical where Herbert is tolerant.

[Back to top](#)

The poems' arguments

Looking at the poets' technique should, perhaps, begin with a consideration of argument. In a way all of the poems have an argument, but it is interesting or striking in some more than others.

[To His Coy Mistress](#) - the light and the serious arguments in one; the structure "Had we ..." "But ..." "Now therefore ...";

[A Valediction Forbidding Mourning](#) - the structure "As ... so" "But ... But" "Therefore" "Such wilt thou be to me ..." and the similarity to this of [The Definition of Love](#) (but there are big differences, too);

The World - various follies depicted, with the solution to the supposed puzzle in the final stanza;

Bermudas and **The Collar** - both use a dramatic form: the puritan sailors' song or the outburst of the rebellious Christian;

The Flower is dramatic, too, but embodies a kind of parable: Herbert sustains both the metaphor and the idea of the speaker as the Christian "Everyman", examining his relationship with God;

Discipline - the severity of God's wrath is mirrored in the taut, cramped lines - compare this with the "disordered" lines of **The Collar**.

[Back to top](#)

Imagery

You can also consider the imagery used by the poets. Do NOT become bogged down in discussion of single images, such as the notorious "twin compasses" in **A Valediction Forbidding Mourning**.

Consider, rather, the whole range of sources of imagery each uses. Broadly speaking, Donne is eclectic (wide-ranging) and apparently obscure. He did not write for publication, but showed poems to friends whom he supposed to be well-read enough to understand these references. Donne's imagery draws on the new (in the late 16th century) learning of the English renaissance and on topical discoveries and exploration. We find references to alchemy, sea-voyages, mythology and religion (among many other things). Certain images or ideas recur so often as to seem typical: **kingship and rule**; **subjectivism** ("one little room an everywhere" "nothing else is"); **alchemy** - especially the mystical beliefs associated with elixir and quintessence - and **cosmology**, both ancient and modern (references both to spheres and to the world of "sea-discoverers").

Herbert's imagery, by way of contrast, draws on the **everyday and familiar**; reason is like "a good huswife", spirit is measured in "drammes" and God's grace is a "silk twist", suffering is a harvest of thorns or blood-letting, Paradise is a garden where winter never comes, severity is a rod and love is God's bow or the host at a banquet. It will be seen, however, that many of these images are found in Christ's teaching, while others (or the same ones) may have acquired religious connotations. The reference to "thorn" and "bloud" in **The Collar** ironically seem to ignore the conventional religious symbolism of these terms.

[Back to top](#)

Vaughan uses imagery almost exclusively from the natural world which is apprehended with a delight notably absent from his perception of most other people. The clue to this lies in **The Retreate** where Vaughan notes that "shadows of eternity" were seen by him in natural phenomena such as clouds or flowers. These images are readily understood and beautiful as with the flown bird and the star liberated from the Tomb. With Marvell, imagery is more problematic. Unlike Donne who scatters metaphors freely, Marvell is more selective and sparing. Very often the image is more memorable and striking than the idea it expresses, as with the "deserts of vast eternity", while frequently one finds an idea which cannot be understood except as the image in which Marvell expresses it, as with the "green thought in a green shade". In any case, with all of these poets, the use of metaphor serves, and is subordinate to, the total argument.

You should not leave the subject of technique without considering two poems (**Jordan I** and **The Coronet**) in which poetry is itself discussed. Herbert argues for plain-speaking, truth (man's real relationship with God, not a pastoral fiction) and simplicity in a poem in which only the final two

lines are simple. Herbert cannot help the cleverness of his verse but time and again concludes poems with praise of simplicity and deprecation of the wit he has just displayed. In **The Coronet**, Marvell considers whether the poetic skill which has formerly (and culpably) served to praise his "shepherdess" can "redress that Wrong", by weaving a "Chaplet" for Christ.

[Back to top](#)

But, the poet concludes, this is self-deception and vanity, and he ends with a prayer that God will act to remove the "Serpent" (the pursuit, in writing, of the poet's own "Fame" or (self) "Interest" - even if this requires the destruction of Marvell's own ingenious verse - "my curious frame"). In the skilful development of the central metaphor of the garland or "coronet" (appropriate both to the pastoral context and with biblical connotations, especially in associating the temptation to evil with the Serpent lurking in the greenery, Marvell exhibits the complexity, the riddling quality which this poem calls into question, perhaps best shown in the tortuous syntax of the first sentence with its succession of subordinate clauses separating the introductory "When" from the subject and main verb "I seek".

[Back to top](#)

Comparing the poets

Openings

All the poets, though they occasionally display erudition (learning) write with fairly colloquial voices. The best-known (and, so, frequently-quoted) examples are Donne's pretended outbursts: "I wonder by my troth ..."; "Busy old foole" and "For God's sake hold your tongue ...". However the simple intimate address to the reader - "'Tis the year's midnight" is no less characteristic of speech.

In Herbert we find equally pregnant openings. There are simple introductory statements which turn out not to be so simple: "Love bade me welcome "(but what is this love, or who?), "I know the wayes of learning ..."; there are questions: "Who sayes that fictions onely ... become a verse?" and tranquil recollections of far from tranquil outbursts: "I struck the board, and cry'd, No more". And, finally, as Donne addresses his mistress directly, so Herbert speaks, in the second person, to God: "Throw away thy rod" and "How fresh, O Lord ... Are thy returns ... These are thy wonders, Lord of love".

As in other respects, Marvell exhibits more variety here. We find the second person in **To His Coy Mistress**. When Donne does this, we can believe, even though his own thoughts are what we learn, that an intimate address to a real woman is intended (in, say, **The Good-Morrow**, **The Anniversarie** and, even, **A Valediction Forbidding Mourning**). But the "Coy Mistress" is conspicuously absent - a mere pretext for Marvell to examine his real subjects - time and the brevity of human happiness.

[Back to top](#)

Themes and subjects

As Donne and Herbert do, Marvell writes much about his own ideas, but with less consistency. There is variety and superficial contradiction in the **Songs and Sonets** but Donne's preoccupation with love is not in doubt. Herbert's devout manner appears consistently in the poems in **The Temple**, but **To His Coy Mistress** is not easily reconciled with **Bermudas** or **The Coronet**. Marvell in all of these poems writes with lucidity and wit yet there is often an element of detachment - perhaps best shown in the dispassionate clarity and wordplay of **The Definition of Love**. It is

interesting to note that the simplicity of much of **Bermudas** (essentially a list of God's gifts to the settlers of the islands, though individual lines contain the usual wit - as in the description of the [pine]apples) is explained by the device of making most of the poem a hymn of gratitude, sung by the English sailors.

Though Vaughan's exclusive religious views may repel us, we cannot ignore the clarity and directness of his style. The syntax is easy to the modern ear and unusual vocabulary is rare. He may open with an exclamation: "Happy those early dayes!" or "They are all gone into the world of light!" The simple understatement employed by Herbert is more than matched in **The World** which has one of the most striking openings of any English poem:

I saw Eternity the other night.

It could be fairly argued that the poem does not wholly succeed in the account, in detail (no poem could!) of the vision of Eternity which follows, but we can see how Vaughan works in the tradition established for poetry by Donne and for devotional verse by Herbert.

[Back to top](#)

Stanzas and poetic form

Donne also establishes a pattern which the others emulate in his use of the stanza. He appears to love variety as a natural embellishment and (to borrow Milton's phrase) "true ornament of verse". We can see this by comparing poems. The three stanza structure which carries the argument in **The Good Morrow** is used again in other poems. But the fluency of the stanza in **The Good-Morrow** leading to the brief penultimate line and final Alexandrine with its stately, measured quality, gives way in **The Sunne Rising** to a far more lively and varied stanza. The almost breathless colloquial lines are, however, qualified in each stanza by a wholly regular and fluent rhyming couplet which enables Donne to conclude with a rhetorical flourish (note, however, that the final pentameter line is divided - rather on the model of the Alexandrine - after the second iambic foot). In **The Anniversarie** the whole stanza is more measured and stately and the Alexandrine is restored as the final line. In **A Nocturnall Upon S. Lucies Day** Donne uses, again, predominantly the pentameter line, yet the whole effect is more laboured than the fluent **Good-Morrow**. This is achieved by repeated interruptions marked by the punctuation.

Herbert matches Donne for variety in the stanza, but is more aware of the appearance of the poem on the page, as well as the effect on the ear. Poems such as **The Altar** and **Easter Wings** are written almost wholly for the sake of appearance. In this selection we should note, especially, **The Collar** and **Discipline**. In **Discipline** the cramped, lean lines reflect the severity which the poet begs God to refrain from using. In **The Collar**, there is an apparent randomness, a lack of order on the page, which mirrors the disordered outburst the poet here records. The jerky quality which derives from rhetorical questions - frequent use of full-stop, colon and question-mark even in mid-line - gives way only in the final four lines to a fluent conclusion which comes with the poet's account of his submission to the divine pull on the collar.

[Back to top](#)

In many of Marvell's poems we find the same eight-syllable iambic line, yet its effect can vary remarkably. In **To His Coy Mistress** the vigorousness of the argument appears in the breathless lines - few are end-stopped, and the lines have the rough power of speech.

In **The Definition of Love** the same line is used, but arranged in four line stanzas. These carry the argument in the same way in which Donne uses this stanza in **A Valediction Forbidding Mourning**. Unlike Donne, who is prepared to allow some use of enjambement (between first and second

stanzas and frequently within all the stanzas) Marvell's stanza here has a near metronomic quality - a punctuation mark at the end of the second line exaggerates the rhyming syllable, which is emphatically matched at the end of the stanza. There is a similar regularity in *Bermudas* but here, by arranging the lines as rhyming pairs, Marvell conveys something of the sense of the motion of the English boat through the water (as the poem's last line makes clear). This same line is used again, but arranged into eight line stanzas to develop the argument in *The Garden*, which is less slick but more profound and thoughtful than that in *The Definition of Love*.

[Back to top](#)

Vaughan feels free to use variety in his stanza. Less spectacularly, perhaps, than Donne, he nonetheless suits form to content. So *The Retreat* is a fast-moving sustained meditation not divided into stanzas. The more contrived and ordered argument of *The World* or *Man* require much longer stanzas, but regular in form, while "*They Are All Gone into the World of Light*", with its shorter stanza, becomes, in effect, a long series of distinct observations on the poem's single subject.

Most of these comments are very general. Connections have been made which you should now exploit in relation to particular poems. Memorizing the text is not required but you must know your way around the poems. Trying, for the first time, to understand them in an exam is not wise.

It is therefore worth taking a poem, and deciding what you can usefully write about it, in terms of content, technique and points of reference to other poems.

[Back to top](#)

Preparing for exams

Make your own idiot-guides or spider-charts to learn this stuff. Clearly, the greater the number of poems for which you can do this, the stronger will be your position in an exam. Make sure, in doing this, that your chosen poems are varied, in terms of author, subject and technique.

A good essay will contain some detailed analysis of some of the poems, but will show general understanding of all of the set poems unless the question explicitly limits you to a smaller selection.

You may find that a question obliges you to consider the work of each poet, or of all poets in relation to some theme or subject. Do NOT keep commentary on each poem separate; DO make comparisons and move freely between or among the poems.

Do NOT quote at length. In an "open book" exam, especially, there is no credit for this. You may need to quote briefly but should use " ... " to eliminate redundant matter.

The time allowed for exams enables you to plan properly; for these poems, planning is indispensable - any essay will require you to write widely; without planning, you will miss important material or points of commentary. Do not waste time labouring (or repeating) a few basic comments.

[Back to top](#)

Most examiners are fair. A question may be off-putting because it contains difficult terms, but the questions which may be asked will usually be fairly straightforward. The questions set may be like these:

- Essays which invite you to examine the poets' treatment of a given subject or theme. These may be limited to two or three of the poets. Possible subjects would include love, religious faith, or (as it includes both of these) the poets' attitude to experience. The examiners may give a subject which imposes a particular plan, but this is NOT likely. You should have an outline (NOT a prepared essay) of your own, for each possible subject.
- Essays which ask what are the special characteristics of "metaphysical poetry". These will appear either as an "open" question ("what makes a metaphysical poem?", in effect) or a quotation, to which you should respond ("The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together". How far is this an accurate assessment etc?") If you have a "quotation" question it is most unlikely that the statement will be one which merits complete agreement or disagreement. You are allowed to qualify your agreement or refutation. N.B. You will never be given a quotation that is stupid or utterly wrong. Generally, they are more or less sensible.

[Back to top](#)

Such essays can work for you, if you know what to do. You should first state what the characteristics of metaphysical poetry are, then illustrate them by consideration of appropriate evidence from the poems. The important tricks here are:

1. Have a clear list of characteristics, ensuring both content and method are covered.
2. Introduce evidence by some formula such as "we find this quality in **The Garden**, where Marvell ..." or "Both Herbert and Vaughan, in their different ways, address this subject in ..."
3. Ensure that you use a wide range of poets and poems. Where possible, compare, even if briefly, in passing.
4. Keep your eye on the ball. When you have shown one characteristic to be present (and how), then move on to the next.

[Back to top](#)

It is just possible that you may be given a question which requires you explicitly to examine (and compare) technique (the poets' method). You should be doing this, anyway, in a poetry essay, so don't be frightened. But you must before the exam have a clear mental checklist of the characteristics to be considered here.

For all of these poets, the method is closely bound up with the subject and mood, so some comment on these, if you make this point, will be allowed.

If you write about Donne (among others) why not put him last? The examiners will see any number of scripts which will begin with the (admittedly interesting) opening of **The Good-Morrow**. Don't let yours be among them!

[Back to top](#)

The poems classified by subject - love

Donne

- **The Good-Morrow**: New love celebrated.
- **The Sunne Rising**: Love fulfilled and celebrated.
- **The Anniversarie**: Love in relation to time.
- **The Canonization**: Love as a new religion.
- **A Valediction**: The consolation of love on parting.

- **A Nocturnall**: A meditation on the lover's desolation.

Herbert

- **Jordan**: Religious devotion versus secular love.
- **The Pearl**: God's love for man.
- **The Collar**: The inevitability of God's love.
- **The Flower**: The severity and grace of a loving God.
- **Discipline**: The same.
- **Love**: The love of Christ the Host.

Marvell

- **The Coronet**: Religious devotion versus secular love.
- **Bermudas**: The mercy and bounty of God's love.
- **To His Coy Mistress**: Sexual love and the brevity of life.
- **The Definition of Love**: A display of the love of wit.
- **The Garden**: Reasonable contemplation as a retreat from passion.

Vaughan

- **The Retreate**: Love of holiness and loss of innocence.
- **The World**: Love of God a mystery; divine election to grace.
- **Man**: Man's purpose to find God beyond this life.
- **They Are All Gone into the World of Light**: The saints' love of God as inspiration.

It will be seen that these descriptions enable you also to select poems which illustrate the general outlook and belief of the poet, or specifically religious questions. Though none of Donne's poems here is truly devotional, the idea of love as a kind of religion appears in places, notably in **The Canonization**.

[Back to top](#)

Poems to compare

The poems are listed as they appear in the collection. Each is followed by the titles of poems which might helpfully be compared. Ensure you know why they can be compared.

Donne

The Good-Morrow: The Sunne Rising, The Anniversarie; A Nocturnall Upon S. Lucies Day.

The Canonization: Good-Morrow, Sunne Rising, Anniversarie; Jordan, The Coronet.

A Valediction Forbidding Mourning: A Nocturnall; The Definition of Love

A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day: The Sunne-Rising, The Good Morrow, The Anniversarie; A Valediction.

[Back to top](#)

Herbert

Generally compare his, Marvell's and Vaughan's devotional lyrics.

Jordan (I): The Coronet

The Pearl: The Flower; The World

The Collar: Discipline, The Flower.
The Flower: The Collar, Discipline; Man.
Discipline: The Collar, The Flower.
Love (III): Bermudas.

[Back to top](#)

Marvell

The Coronet: Jordan.
Bermudas: Love, The Flower.
To His Coy Mistress: The Anniversarie, The Canonization.
The Definition of Love: A Valediction.
The Garden: Bermudas; The Flower.

[Back to top](#)

Vaughan

Generally contrast Vaughan's zeal and passion with Herbert's generosity and tolerance.

The Retreat: The Collar, The Flower.
The World: The Pearl; Bermudas.
Man: The Collar, The Flower.
They Are All Gone into the World of Light: The Retreat; The Flower; The Canonization.

Remember similarities may be of content, theme, mood or argument. Look out for contrasting approaches to the same subject or theme, too.

[Back to top](#)

Please acknowledge my authorship by giving the URL of any pages you use, and/or include the © copyright symbol. Suggestions for improvement are welcome. Thank you.

© Andrew Moore, 2000; universalteacher@bigfoot.com